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SUBJECT: Ecuador Election Update--Six Months Out

Ref: Quito 407

Note: This is an action request for WHA and USAID--see last para.

¶1. (U) Summary: Six months away from national elections in October, and three months before candidates formally register, more than 20 aspirants already crowd the presidential field and that number is likely to rise. Former VP Leon Roldos holds a consistent lead in early polling, but most Ecuadorians are still undecided. Roldos is followed in the polls by banana magnate Alvaro Noboa and newly-announced Social Christian candidate Cynthia Viteri. Former Finance Minister Rafael Correa is seeking indigenous support and is widely perceived as Chavez' candidate.

¶2. (U) Ex-president Lucio Gutierrez claims to be running and retains core support, but may be blocked on constitutional grounds. Congress has moved to increase campaign finance limits and select a method for proportional representation, both important advances. It is currently debating electoral reforms to block candidates like Gutierrez, and promote party discipline. New election authorities have launched a series of initiatives, but need additional OAS and USG support for training and observation. End Summary.

Pre-candidates multiplying

¶3. (U) Candidates cannot officially register their candidacies until July 15, but unofficial candidate lists are growing steadily and now number over 20. Interestingly, all the top contenders (with the exception of ex-president Gutierrez) hail from the coastal region; none are from the highlands. The top contenders include former VP Leon Roldos, a center-left pragmatist who has allied with the Democratic Left (ID) party and named a popular and respected young ID leader, Pichincha Prefect Ramiro Gonzalez, as his running mate. Thus far, no other candidates have announced their running mates. Cythia Viteri (PSC) was nominated by her party in a well-choreographed event in Portoviejo, in populos Manabi province, on April 28, with rival PSC leaders Leon Febres Cordero and Jaime Nebot both in attendance.

¶4. (U) Dark horse populist, anti-American candidate Rafael Correa is still low in the polls, with less than 10% support, but is seeking an electoral alliance with the indigenous Pachakutik movement. The organized indigenous

are divided over whether to support Rafael Correa or to run their own candidate; CONAIE leaders reportedly oppose such an alliance, making it less likely to flourish. Humberto Guillem, the former prefect (U.S. governor-equivalent) of Manabi province, is trailing far behind as the candidate of ex-president Abdala Bucaram's discredited Roldosista Party (not linked to Leon Roldos).

¶5. (SBU) Ex-president Lucio Gutierrez retains significant core support among popular sectors and his home Amazonian region in early polls, but could be blocked from running by pending legislation in Congress (see below) or by the electoral commission (TSE). Consecutive re-election is prohibited by the constitution. Gutierrez argues that his term was interrupted and therefore his bid is not consecutive. Some speculate the PSC, which controls the Constitutional Court, might ultimately support a Gutierrez candidacy, to undermine the electoral base of Correa.

Polls Show Roldos Maintaining Early Lead

¶6. (U) A recent poll by "Informe Confidencial" of residents of Quito and Guayaquil generally tracks with other early poll trends, showing Roldos substantially leading the field in Quito, with 29% support, followed by Viteri (10%) and Gutierrez (10%), then Noboa (8%) and Correa (8%). In Guayaquil, Alvaro Noboa leads slightly, with 26%, followed by Roldos (23%), Viteri (16%), Gutierrez (8%), and Correa (4%). However, a recent national Cedatos poll showed most Ecuadorian voters (well over 60%) still undecided on their preferences at this stage in the race.

Latest Contender: Cynthia Viteri

¶7. (SBU) Viteri told the Ambassador on May 2 that her campaign will be grassroots and emphasize national unity, appealing to civil society and business groups for support but avoiding alliances with other parties. She would emphasize job creation and citizen security over women's issues, she said, since it was unclear that a female candidacy would appeal to voters. An appealing and charismatic candidate in her own right, Viteri suffers from her close association with discredited party boss Febres Cordero. She told the Ambassador she hoped to balance the PSC ticket with a youngish male VP candidate from Quito or the highlands. (Note: PSC sources tell us this decision will not be entirely Viteri's, but will be reached with senior party leaders.)

¶8. (SBU) Viteri estimated the PSC electoral base to be 11-12%, and seeks to build on that reach the 19 or 20% needed to make the second round of voting on November 26, preferably against Noboa, (everybody's favorite runoff opponent after two consecutive second-place finishes). Viteri emphasized to the Ambassador the need for an FTA "on equal terms" with the U.S., to generate investment and job creation in Ecuador. She also alleged Correa was receiving substantial financial assistance for his campaign from Chavez, and she planned to publicly protest against this "flagrant interference in Ecuador's internal affairs."

Electoral Proposals Under Debate

¶9. (U) After setting aside an electoral reform package proposed by the executive, Congress is debating its own proposed electoral reforms including a provision (referred to popularly as the "muerte politica" or "political death" clause) which would prevent anyone removed from office before the end of their term from seeking elected office again for a set period (the proposal began as a prohibition for life, but is now down to just six years). If passed, this would prohibit ex-president Lucio Gutierrez from participating in this election or next. As currently formulated, the proposal would affect former congress members expelled from several major parties as well. Other

elements of the measure would reserve national elected office for registered political parties only, and would promote party discipline by stiffening penalties for disaffiliation once in office. Congress is scheduled to vote on the bill on May 10, and a modified version of the bill is expected to pass.

¶10. (U) Civil society leader Cesar Montufar, former head of the electoral watchdog NGO "Citizen Participation," is leading the call for another electoral initiative, referred to here as the "sixth ballot." If accepted by electoral authorities, this initiative would place a sixth ballot (in addition to those for president/VP; congress; Andean parliament; provincial and municipal councils) asking voters if they favor one or a series of undefined political reforms, in general terms (e.g. "do you support reforms to depoliticize the Supreme Electoral Tribunal"). The constitution does not provide for this modified referendum, which would be non-binding on the next government. Organizers are conducting a march from Quito to Guayaquil to generate support for the proposal, and to gather citizen suggestions for questions to put to the voters.

Electoral Process: Challenges, Old and New

¶11. (U) Congress finally acted to raise historically low campaign spending limits, and recently decided on a proportional representation method. The latter is awaiting the signature of President Palacio, who is expected to sign. The method chosen is a complex formula, understood by few, resulting from the Ecuadorian constitutional guarantee that voters may select candidates by party list or individually. Proposed by an obscure Ecuadorian mathematician, German Rojas, TSE officials complain the formula will be complicated to administer and will require a thorough understanding by polling booth workers.

¶12. (U) TSE president Xavier Cazar told AID Director and PolChief on April 28 that the TSE had made progress but faced difficult budgetary and other constraints. Registration of 141,407 Ecuadorian voters abroad had exceeded all expectations and stretched Ecuador's consulates to the limit. Most of these voters (82%) registered to vote in Europe, especially Spain with 89,000--only 16,000 registered in the United States. Here at home, the TSE had invited the OAS to send an observation mission, and approved international observation proposals from the EU and CAPEL, and domestic observation by two Ecuadorian NGOs receiving AID support: "Citizen Participation" and the indigenous "Quel'qaj Foundation."

¶13. (U) Cazar said the TSE is working well with disabled citizens to ensure special attention, a claim corroborated by our contacts. Braille ballots will be made available for blind voters for the first time. Cazar requested (\$650,000) in USG support to the CAPEL, for training of election workers at all levels. Cazar also asked the USG to help close a \$40,000 budget gap to meet the needs of disabled voters.

Action Request

¶14. (U) AID has only \$250,000 in unrestricted Development Assistance funds available to provide support to the TSE. AID also has additional funds to promote electoral inclusiveness, including for the disabled. To ensure that Ecuador's poll workers are able to administer free, fair and inclusive elections, we request additional DA funding to support the TSE to provide electoral training, as requested by the electoral tribunal.

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